NRCS Natural Resources Conservation Service Washington

CONSERVATION Showcase

Conservation buffers yield wildlife, water quality thanks to farm family's dedication

A few weeks ago, eight-year-old Campbell Schulke set out to capture a crawfish from Dry Creek. He caught one. Then he put it in a jar and proudly took it to school to show his buddies.

Today, he's on another mission – this time to find a frog. And thanks to years of riparian rehabilitation work by his parents and his grandparents, he'll likely be successful in that quest, too.

But just ten years previous, before miles of trees, shrubs and grasses were established, his chances of finding any life along Dry Creek were close to nil, according to his father, Jeff Schulke.

"You wouldn't have found anything before. There was absolutely nothing green along the creek," says Mr. Schulke, a fifth generation farmer. "There would have been cattails here and there, but there would have been cows standing in the creek, too."

It's far from a comprehensive biological inventory, but the crawfish, frogs and other aquatic life young Campbell now finds in abundance along the creek is strong anecdotal evidence that the riparian buffers the Schulke family invested so much of their time, money and hearts into – is changing the environment for the better. It's also creating a green corridor that's a haven for wildlife of all varieties.

Representing the fourth, fifth and sixth generations on their land, are (from left to right) Jane, Campbell, Jim, Jeff, Emerson and Kara Schulke. Because of their work in developing miles of riparian buffers along Dry Creek, the Schulke's were honored this year by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the State Conservation Commission.

Creating that corridor for wildlife is one of the reasons Mr. Schulke was recently named "State Wildlife Farmer of the Year" by the Washington Association of Conservation Districts, in cooperation with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the State Conservation Commission.

Interestingly, his initial motivation for buffering the stream had less to do with

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wildlife, and more to do with simply wanting to let "Mother Nature take care of the stream," he says. Mr. Schulke and his family farm some 3,000 acres of dry land wheat and barley just north of Walla Walla, Washington. Dry Creek meanders for miles through the fields they farm.

"I wanted to take that interface I had with the stream and do what was best environmentally and economically," he says.

Mr. Schulke says that previous generations used fences and cattle to manage the stream that bordered the fields they farmed. "Our ancestors probably decided that it was easier to put a fence up next to the creek and let the cows graze the vegetation to take care of the creek. We took the fence and the livestock out of the picture and decided that it was easier to let Mother Nature take care of that swath," he says. "I've done the same thing with vegetation that they did with fences and hogs and cows."

Jeff Schulke, left, and NRCS Soil Conservationist Jim Loiland review the conservation plan that provided the blueprint for the remarkable terrestrial transformation along Dry Creek.

Many of the environmental benefits of the buffers are obvious. Visitors can see and hear dozens of birds species as they flutter amid the tall willows and ample shrubs that now line the creek. Hawks screech and soar overhead. Quail glide toward, and then disappear into large thickets of basin wild rye grass.

And at the places where roads and bridges cross the creek – where one can actually see the water – there's another obvious environmental benefit. Water that previously flowed chalky-brown and warm is now running clean and cool.

"There's no doubt that the water is much less turbid now than it used to be," Mr. Schulke says.

"That's an important resource and wildlife benefit," says Jim Loiland, a soil conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). "It may be hard for some to believe in the heart of wheat country that this is an important, salmon-bearing stream," he says, "but it's true."

It was the right combination of environmental and economic benefits that provided the catalyst for the vegetative transformation that has occurred along the stream. Through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), the Schulke's were able to make the endeavor work – economically – for their farming operation.

CREP pays farmers a soil rental rate for the cropland that's taken out of production and provides payments to establish and maintain the buffers.

"We figured if we could take a program that would pay us not to farm some of the area right along the creek, and make it work economically, then it

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Once nearly denuded, the banks of Dry Creek are now lush with a wide variety of grasses, bushes, forbes and trees as it meanders through the Schulke farm.

became a symbiotic proposition," he says. "We've been in the business of farming right up to the edge of the stream for a long time, so we knew the total cost for an acre along the stream was costing us probably five times more to farm that one acre than it did in the middle of the field, just because of overlap of sprays and fertilizers and the extra time in maintaining that small margin next to the stream," he says.

Working on a voluntary basis with resource professionals from the NRCS and the Walla Walla County Conservation District in the late 1990s, the Schulkes began planting vegetation along the stream – vegetation that is now plush, abundant and diverse.

But Mr. Schulke says establishing the buffers wasn't without considerable effort. "In the first couple of years, this wasn't easy – especially with the scope of this project. It's hard to get a good stand of grass in the first year. It's either too hot, or too cold, or too wet, or too dry," he says.

Adding to the challenges of getting the plants to grow is the problem of invasive weeds, cheat grass and wild oats out-competing the desired vegetation. "Plus," he says, "there's every pest you can think of. At one point we had gofers that took off and decimated whole lines of shrubs. Part of that," he says "is because we're taking intensely managed ground and trying to bring it back to something that's self-regulating. The land doesn't make that switch easily."

Mr. Schulke says the process of establishing buffers takes patience and perseverance. "We had to learn to move at Mother Nature's speed. Once we stopped trying to force the buffer to mature by going in there and over-managing it, and began letting it manage itself, things started to work," he says.

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"Our main management practice now is mowing – in the fall, after the nesting season regulations are expired. At that point we'll go in and mow the problem areas before any of the weeds have a chance to go to seed. Now we're at a point where the buffer sort of self-regulates," Mr. Schulke says.

What about the lost production from the land that's now in buffers? Mr. Schulke says at $3 a bushel for wheat, the economic decision was easy. "But when we hit $12 a bushel for wheat last year," he says, "it made you look at it and wonder because that's a hundred bushels of wheat an acre every year next to that creek. But," he adds, "the cost of farming that and interfacing has a high cost, too."

So is it still worth it? "I have no regrets, none at all," he says. Mr. Schulke's neighbors apparently feel the same way. "I haven't heard any of our neighbors who are involved in this program say 'I wish I could tear that all out,'" he says.

"Just look at that," Mr. Schulke says, pointing with pride to the lush vegetation along the stream. "This is like a giant green-belt. You can even see it on the satellite photos now from the internet mapping sites."

Even at a time of record high commodity prices, the Schulke's are considering doing even more with buffers. "We're looking at doing field buffers, conservation easements, all kinds of things," he says.

All of those conservation practices, as well as those already installed on the Schulke property, will likely keep young Campbell occupied for years as he explores, discovers and collects more wildlife specimens from along the banks of Dry Creek.

Written and photographed by
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